

“Stay committed to your decisions, but stay flexible in your approach.”

Tony Robbins

Sports Specialization

In the past, playing one sport all year round was not common. However, as the industry becomes more intense and youth athletics become hyper-organized, many parents and coaches have subjected their children and athletes to continuous training in one sport from an early age. The 10,000 hour rule, which suggests it takes that amount of time in organized and structured training to develop complete mastery, has been cited as one of the reasons for this emphasis on specialization.



However, there have been no studies that found evidence to confirm that playing one sport only from an early age makes a difference in the acquisition of elite level sporting talent. In fact, some models such as the [Long-Term Athlete Development \(LTAD\)](#) model, suggest that it is only the acrobatic and artistic sports such as diving, gymnastics, and figure skating which require early specialization. The model labels all other sports as late specialization, with no need for year-round practice in the one sport until puberty.

The Problems of Early Specialization

The continuous intense repetition in one sport from an early age can lead to a range of negative consequences. Physically, injuries from overuse such as tennis elbow, rotator cuff injuries, and stress



fractures have been shown to be experienced more frequently in these athletes. Psychologically, the pressures from coaches and parents to perform consistently at a high level and the intense training that goes along with this can cause serious burnout. The opportunity to engage in multiple activities allows young children to experience different environments and exercise different mental and social skills that allow them to become well-rounded individuals.

Athletes who specialize early are prevented from learning transferable physical and mental skills which can be used from sport to sport, which is an important element of sport proficiency. For example, NFL players such as Odell Beckham Jr., Ndamokung Suh, and Andrew Luck have credited playing soccer at a

young age with helping them to develop the necessary footwork and other skills that have made them successful at football.

These, and the multiple other examples of professional athletes playing two or more sports throughout high school, show that it is not necessary to focus on one sport from an early age to get to the pinnacle of your chosen sport.

Sports Specialization During the Teenage Years

Sports specialization during the teenage years is much more acceptable, but it is important that the athlete, coaches, and parents are aware of the risks that can come with this if not handled properly. Because of the growing that occurs throughout puberty, teenage athletes are especially at risk for overuse injuries if there is too much stress placed on bones and other parts of the body which are developing.

The American Medical Society for Sports Medicine, in its position statement on overuse injuries and burnout in youth sports, specifically points to this growth as a major risk factor that makes these injuries much more likely during the adolescent years. They state that with the growth plates, bones, and cartilage undergoing changes they are less resistant to tension and other forces that come with playing sports intensely. Increases in joint hypermobility and imbalances in growth and strength as the body adjusts were also pinpointed by these experts as factors that make overuse injuries likely for teenage athletes.

To counter these risks, the paper goes on to recommend limiting sport specific repetitive movements such as having a pitch limit in baseball/softball, scheduling rest periods, and careful monitoring of athlete workloads. All of this should be done in consideration of the athlete's age, growth rate, and injury history.

Cross Training*

For the teenage athlete who is now specializing in a single sport, the importance of cross training cannot be understated. If a youth athlete comes to a decision that they would like to focus only on one sport to maximize their prospects of reaching an elite skill level and moving into the college and professional ranks, there will still be the need for extensive rest and recovery time for their body. This is especially true for the muscles, ligaments, tendons, etc. which are at risk for overwork.

For example, an avid tennis player might find it beneficial to periodically take part in different sports that use other parts of the body than the hands, elbows, and shoulders that are repetitively used in tennis. For example, taking part in soccer or cycling once in a while will allow them to reduce the stress load on these areas and provide more time for recovery.



Participation in another sport can also provide athletes with a different type of fitness (anaerobic* vs aerobic*) that increases their capacity to perform in their priority sport. Another alternative that can be explored is to take part in activities such as yoga and Pilates that will help increase flexibility, which is a beneficial attribute in any sport.

*Definitions:

Cross training is a technique that involves using different types of exercise to provide variety, train for sports, and reduce the risk of repetitive injuries.

Anaerobic exercises are brief, strength-based activities, such as sprinting or bodybuilding. Any short exertion, high-intensity movement is an anaerobic exercise.

Aerobic exercises, also called cardiovascular exercises, are activities that get your heart pumping and your breath coming up short. Examples include running, swimming, or cross-country skiing.